

‘Don’t show the play at the football ground, nobody will come’: the micro-sociality of co-produced research in an English provincial city

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Abstract

This article examines the idea that community is best understood through the concept of micro-sociality, as a verb, as ongoing social relations in action, rather than a thing to be possessed, lacked or lost. Such an emphasis on already-existing relations has consequences for the conduct of publicly-funded interventions including socially engaged research projects. This article tells a part of the story of one such project in Peterborough, England in the 2010s. If the project was counter-cultural in working with what was already happening in the city, rather than seeking to proselytize a culturally specific view of citizenship and the arts, it also faced its own political choices regarding whose work to accompany and how. Initiated by a group of outsider academics and artists, it involved transformations at varying scales, both fleeting and longer-lasting, often unplanned. The article takes a look at the project’s own micro-sociality in the choices city residents made to accompany its intentions and practices. Like other people, university researchers and artists are seen to depend on social relations, including the commitment and care of people they work with.

Keywords: community, oral history, arts, performance, Peterborough

Introduction

Austerity in 2010s Britain meant cuts to some welfare benefits and caps on others, the shutting down of public services, redundancies in local government and the end of funding for many voluntary organizations. If jobs were available they were very often contingent: part-time, short-term, subcontracted or a combination of these (Fudge and Strauss, 2013). The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government that came to power in 2010 also announced a new policy of ‘localism’, which, they stated, would empower local communities to take decisions for themselves away from the control of bureaucrats. And crucially, through an initiative branded as ‘big society’, the government

encouraged people to volunteer in their localities so that services that had previously been funded could now be provided with no staffing costs. Meanwhile inequality of wealth and income continued to grow, especially between the wealthiest one per cent and the rest (Dorling, 2014; O. Jones, 2014). All of these processes varied in their regional and local manifestations (Peck, 2012: 628–629).¹

This article is about the conduct of place-based research in the context of wider governmental projects of transformation at a time of austerity. As a case study, I reflect on a particular research collaboration between academics and artists – the *Places for All?*² project in Peterborough, England – that, ironically in the context of drastic cutbacks in government spending, received public funding from 2011 to 2013 connected with the early rolling out of the ‘big society’ vision (the connection is elaborated on below). *Places for All?* set out to use oral history, ethnography, film, photography and theatre to explore the multiple and diverse place attachments and work and migration histories of Peterborough residents of all ethnic backgrounds, from people born in the city to people who had arrived very recently. Involving a team of seven outside professionals (academics and artists),³ it engaged with the stories of over 100 residents. Oral history interviews were conducted with 76 people, 54 of whom were further involved with the preparation of transcripts for deposit in the local archives. The project also transcribed oral history interviews with a further 18 Peterborough residents that had been recorded for the BBC’s Millennium Memory Bank.⁴ As well as residential fieldwork carried out by Kaveri Qureshi and myself for varying lengths of time (see Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013), other members of the team were engaged in arts activities from young people’s theatre inspired by the oral histories we had collected (Mukul Ahmed, Raminder Kaur), through individual photographs of narrators (Liz Hingley), to films co-produced with people who had experienced street homelessness in the city or lived in supported housing (Teresa Cairns and Dennis Doran).

Places for all? was associated with the ‘big society’ initiative through the way it was funded. It was designed in response to a call for proposals for a Peterborough-based research fellowship put out by the then recently-launched Research Councils Connected Communities programme. Although the Connected Communities programme had been planned before ‘big society’ began to be rolled out from May 2010, the programme’s initial documentation explicitly linked it to ‘big society’, attracting criticism from large numbers of academics.⁵ However, ‘big society’ itself was relatively short-lived as a Conservative credo, disappearing almost entirely within five years of its emergence.⁶ *Places for All?* was further implicated in the coalition government’s localism agenda because the fellowship was to be a collaboration with the Citizen Power Peterborough programme (2010–2012), itself a three-way alliance between the Royal Society of Arts, Arts Council England and Peterborough City Council. On the face of it therefore, *Places for All?* might have been expected to fall in with officially sanctioned efforts to demonstrate the advantages of volunteering, neighbourhood committees and associated initiatives in the face of

wide-ranging and deep cuts in central and local government spending. It might then have been justly critiqued for acquiescence with a neoliberal agenda (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 26). Perhaps paradoxically, it might also have been seen as part of a push to bring significant public investment to Peterborough in the form of a major arts venue, and associated well-known arts names.⁷

In practice, *Places for All?* took a very different tack. Peterborough is a working-class city, a place with relatively high numbers of people on lower than average wages and engaged in elementary occupations. It is also home to many recently arrived migrants and to long-term resident ethnic and faith minorities. Rather than assuming, in a quasi-colonial mode (Mignolo, 2009; Adams, 2014; Brownlie and Crowe, 2014: 203) that it was appropriate to come in from outside and teach people how to be better citizens, appreciate art, etc., *Places for All?* sought to engage with *existing* creative projects and social struggles in the city, to work with what was already there (see Walkerdine, this issue; Wills, this issue), and to understand, even at times accompany, expressions of popular agency in the face of austerity's structural conditions (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 26). Nevertheless, like other socially engaged, arts-based research interventions, the project inevitably made its own contribution to the politics of urban space (Kester, 2013; Rogers, 2012: 69).

The *Places for All?* project thus *both* implicitly critiqued the outside agendas for local transformation with which it was associated through its funding source, *and* contained its own politics and its own agenda. In the article I attend to the ambiguities and ambivalences of the project, revealing the dynamics of its 'impacts' to be emergent, uneven and sometimes uncomfortable. Along the way, while examining the forms, sites and practices of 'micro-sociality' in the context of the project, I engage with academic debates on the complexity of co-production and the politics of place-based research. As explained further in the next section, the concept of micro-sociality enables a dynamic approach to 'community' that carries few of the normative claims, judgements and promises often associated with that term. The same section also briefly introduces the critical way in which the notion of 'accompaniment' can be used to describe the project's ethos and practice. Two further sections then detail the national and local contexts before I go on in three subsequent sections to expand on the conduct of the *Places for All?* project, illustrating it through vignettes from the curation of a photographic exhibition at a car boot sale, and the production of a play, both of which involved the Peterborough United football ground alluded to in the title. A final section then concludes the article.

Micro-sociality: community-as-a-verb and the practice of accompaniment

The micro-sociality approach developed by Studdert encompasses both an ontology of community (Schechtman, 2007), and, connected to this, attention as much to the conduct as to the content of social research (Foster and Lorimer,

2007: 427; Studdert, this issue; Walkerdine, this issue). Proposing a micro-sociality approach in the funding bid that led to this Special Issue, Walkerdine and Studdert (2013) argued that community is better understood as a verb than a noun, with ‘communal being-ness . . . the outcome of constantly created acts of recognition . . . “[C]ommunity” is [thus] not a thing confined to one historical moment, but is contained in a series of timeless and on-going activities and, as such, exists, to some degree or another, everywhere, continually’. This view, building on Studdert’s (2006) reading of Hannah Arendt’s (1958) *The Human Condition* also sees community as, literally, a condition for existence. Arendt emphasized the fragility inherent in being human, and the webs of relations required for individual survival. As Wills puts it (this issue), ‘[i]f, by community, we are referring to the necessary social relationships on which we depend, human beings can never be outside community and without community, we would die’.

One of the main criticisms of the coalition government’s localism agenda was its implied assumption of localities as having homogeneous sets of interests, its denial of politics within those localities, of the ‘plural, heterogeneous and contested’ ways in which localities work (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013: 14). This emphasis on plurality fits well with Hannah Arendt’s thought. For Arendt, plurality is ‘the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live’ (1958: 8). Studdert reads Arendt as arguing that plurality is a condition of ‘the common world’, and that without it that ‘world is lost . . . The recognition of plurality allows . . . for the social to be permanently “open”: “open” moreover to both the creation of new identities and the play of perspectives that construct the “who” as an inter-relational and social being’ (2006: 204–205; see also de Carteret, 2008).

Walkerdine and Studdert (2013) provide empirical examples of what they mean by micro-sociality: ‘all or any interaction between people, something as small as smiling at people you recognize from frequent sightings but do not know, to groups working for common goals like a community centre, to the various behaviours of the state through formal and informal interaction’. If the concept of micro-sociality is to be used to cover such a wide terrain, and, if community-as-action exists always and everywhere, then not only do localities’ diverse ways of working need to be critically examined (as the above reference to Clarke and Cochrane’s recent study of localism implied), but the relations involved in outside-funded university-led research and arts interventions (like *Places for All?*) must also come into the analytical frame: they are indeed a central concern of this article. The crisis brought about by decades of neoliberalism is ‘not *out there*, but rather *in here*, evident every day in the routine practices of higher education’ (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 4, authors’ emphasis). These practices include research as well as teaching. The conduct of academic research, including how university-based researchers go about knowing, entails its own micro-sociality.

Walkerdine and Studdert (2013) argue that, through attention to micro-sociality, scholars can move beyond the contradictory approach to the concept of community – both endlessly critiquing it and simultaneously deploying it in funding applications – to make more powerful contributions to the study of what community actually entails. Yet stating this contradiction does not remove it, and the need remains to undo the conceptual separation of ‘community’ and ‘academic research’ that characterizes the discourse of many university-based social scientists. Inspired by El Salvador’s Archbishop Romero, Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2013: 10) propose the practice of accompaniment for their academic field of American Studies:

Accompaniment recognizes the inescapably and quintessentially *social* nature of scholarship and citizenship. It requires viewing everything that happens to and in American studies as part of a broader social field of action, not as an isolated, atomized, hermetically sealed site relevant only to the academy ... [For Romero accompaniment] entailed working for social justice together and finding common ground as humans despite the radical divisiveness inherent in a stratified society.

Accompaniment offers a fundamentally anti-colonial approach to intervention, including by research projects. It offers ‘devices for individuals from different backgrounds with different experiences, perspectives, and interests to recognize and reinforce each other’s dignity by working together’ (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 10). As we shall see, *Places for All?* evolved *its own* ‘micro-sociality’, and became, in temporally uneven ways, a site for mutual transformation, conflict and co-operation. Reflecting back on the micro-sociality of *Places for All?* suggests intentions that can retrospectively be seen to have been aligned with an accompaniment approach, and practices and relations that often fell short of that, but which, through collective reflection and collaborative response, could be, and sometimes were transformed. There is a paradox in the project’s combination of a stated aim of transforming relations in a place (Peterborough) and its claim to have adopted an anti-colonial way of working. To explore this further, I will next return briefly to the national context of continuing neoliberal austerity, before going on to describe key political, economic and cultural dynamics in Peterborough, which form the context for the subsequent discussion on the micro-sociality of the *Places for All?* project.

National context: continuation of the neoliberal settlement

Following the international financial crisis of the late 2000s and the state-funded bailout of key financial institutions, the population at large in various affected nations was to be made to pay. In the UK this meant cuts to the welfare budget, to central funding for local government, and consequently to public services. The stated aim of this intensified austerity regime was to rebalance the UK’s national finances. However, the chosen mechanism was not to cap bankers’ pay or to tax large financial institutions, but rather to make it harder to qualify for ever more meagre levels of welfare benefit. And austerity also meant a

contraction in the economy, so that it became harder to find work that paid enough to live on, especially in the parts of the country where housing costs were highest. Many people in low-paid work had to accept real pay cuts and increasingly relied on a combination of benefits and wages from work. Yet both the UK government, and many parts of the national media demonized all those claiming benefits, evoking a historical binary division between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor people through rhetorical categories of 'strivers' and 'skivers'/'shirkers' (O. Jones, 2011; Valentine and Harris, 2014; Slater, 2014; McKenzie, 2015; Rogaly, 2015) that served to divide and distract people from attending to the causes of austerity and those actually responsible for it.

According to Hall *et al.* (2015), the intention and effect of neoliberalism since the 1980s has been to reassert elite power. The neoliberal settlement can be seen as a conjuncture of forces operating through the economy, politics, culture and ideology. So as well as invoking divisions between an imaginary set of workers and people reliant on benefits, further divisions have also been produced and perpetuated along lines of ethnic and national identity, and international migration history. Mainstream media coverage and public policy positions have given rise to questions over (1) whether people arriving in the UK from other countries are seeking to come for the purpose of claiming welfare benefits, using the National Health Service or otherwise taking advantage of what is portrayed as an innocent, generous and 'tolerant' nation; and, conversely, (2) whether international migrants were 'taking' jobs that ought to have been available for British nationals (see Ince *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, descendants of earlier waves of immigration, especially Muslims, were prominent among those portrayed as suspect in terms of loyalty to an idea of the nation based around whiteness and a timeless notion of indigeneity (Nickels *et al.*, 2012).

This was the context in which localism was introduced, apparently intended to provide more say for local residents in the governance of towns and cities, and more power to localities in relation to the national government. Again there was continuity with the previous government's policy of devolving funding to communities, through its New Deal scheme (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013: 13). The leadership of Conservative-run Peterborough City Council was eager to participate in experiments consonant with the national policy of localism and the government's 'big society' initiative.

Peterborough and the Citizen Power Programme

Even in times of austerity there was work available in Peterborough, which was a major hub for a new kind of food capitalism through which the UK's oligopoly of large supermarkets sourced, warehoused and distributed a large share of the country's fresh food supply (Rogaly, 2008; Rogaly and Qureshi, 2016). This small cathedral city (population 183,000)⁸ was often portrayed in national debates as 'rural', an example of the kinds of places that international migrants were heading for in distinction from earlier patterns of migration

in which people had moved to metropolitan cities or northern mill towns (H. Jones, 2013). In 2012 the city was visited by both the leader of the opposition Labour Party Ed Miliband and the Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper as the location for announcements of new tougher Labour Party policies on alleged practices of temporary employment agencies, such as hiring only foreign nationals and housing workers in overcrowded accommodation. Further, as the challenge to the currently dominant political parties emerged in the shape of increasing support for the anti-EU and anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP), national journalists such as the BBC's Nick Robinson and the *Guardian's* John Harris chose Peterborough as the site from which to file reports on anti-immigrant sentiment among British nationals in areas with relatively large numbers of migrants from central and eastern Europe.

Yet Peterborough was not a particular stronghold for UKIP. Nor indeed, in spite of the growth of the Muslim population from 5.7 to 9.4 per cent of the population between 2001 and 2011,⁹ did many of its residents become involved in the anti-Islamic English Defence League (EDL). An EDL rally in the city in 2010 was attended by an estimated 1,200 people,¹⁰ most of them arriving on coaches from outside Peterborough (Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013). This itself raises issues regarding the deployment of localism as an instrument through which to assert a particular racialized and Christianized take on British national identity. In Peterborough thousands of Muslims, life-long local residents, were having their right to the city effectively challenged by outsiders, on the basis that they (the outsiders) were representative of a self-identified national majority: white, English and affiliated to Christianity.¹¹ As the EDL supporters left the rally, some passed the entrance to the Anglican Cathedral where clergy were giving out leftover Christingle oranges to passers-by. There had been a scheduled service for schools but turnout had been lower than expected because of the tense atmosphere in the build up to the EDL rally. Perhaps, reflecting the ethnic version of Christian nominalism (Day, 2011), EDL supporters sought conversation and identification with representatives of a church. This was not reciprocated; indeed the following day a large event was held in the grounds of the cathedral supported by all the major faiths in the city to demonstrate unity in opposition to the EDL's ideology.¹²

This was a time of ambitious regeneration plans on the part of the City Council and their private development partners. The developers saw profits to be made from planned new housing and retail units in the city centre and the construction of a large housing estate to the south. Peterborough had already been a major part of the New and Expanded Towns programme from the late 1960s to the 1980s and had doubled its population in that time. The agenda of attracting national and international arts to the city fitted with the council's plan to promote the city as a destination for professional and other technically skilled migrants from other parts of the UK, to change the demographic and thereby actively bring about cultural change in the place. While the overall aim of

Citizen Power was to encourage people to become more actively engaged in the governance of Peterborough, a key member of the consortium, Arts Council England, hoped that by contributing funding there was a greater chance of bringing artists of national and international renown to the city.

It is possible that the wider population of Peterborough would have wanted a university and a major arts venue there too. And this article does not argue against those aims. However, through a de-colonial research strategy of accompaniment (Adams, 2014: 167) and careful listening to people's stories (Back, 2007; Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 27; Gidley, 2015; Walkerdine, this issue), the *Places for All?* project attempted to get under the skin of what was actually happening in Peterborough at a time when powerful national and local actors were trying to bring both 'art' and 'active citizenship' to the city. Regarding art, the efforts being made could be seen as symptomatic of an international move towards stimulating 'creative cities', or sectors of cities, as a means to economic regeneration (Daniels and Lorimer, 2012: 4). This move also meant developing an appeal to the so-called 'creative class'. Peterborough City Council was keen to draw in professional workers just as it sought to continue the regeneration of the city centre. The idea of the 'creative class' fitted well with that as Edensor *et al.* (2010: 6) point out:

In current conceptualisations, members of the creative class possess the appropriate qualities for producing creative work or products of value. In terms of their spatial preferences, they are drawn to locales with art galleries, chic shopping areas, heritage, museums, cafes and a reputation for cosmopolitanism and liberal attitudes towards sexuality, gender and other forms of difference. Yet, such an emphasis is shrouded in a particular set of middle-class values, and the implication persists that differently positioned social groups lack the necessary creative skills, cultural tastes and competencies to effectively operate within the creative economy, and even more, that there is a creative class – and therefore other classes that are not creative.

However, class, 'race' and faith are deeply interconnected in the UK and the agenda was not just about class. The idea that art needed to be brought to a place that had too little of it because it was good for people connects explicitly with the fixed notion of a community 'characterized by a lack' (Walkerdine, this issue), and indeed with a kind of cultural imperialism that values certain forms of creative expression over others. The Arts Council's vision for bringing major established productions and exhibitions to Peterborough seemed to resonate with what Chambers and Ahmed (2012) identify as the 'near deification' of art by hard secularists.

The *Places for All?* project team had sought not to be part of the evaluation of the work of Citizen Power Peterborough. However, because (1) *Places for All?* was a collaboration with the Royal Society of Arts; (2) as Principal Investigator I was expected to maintain regular involvement in Citizen Power team meetings in London (as well as meeting monthly with the academic conducting the evaluation);¹³ and (3) when my colleagues and I introduced our work to people in Peterborough we had to mention the connection to Citizen

Power – after all, as already mentioned, we were implicated in it – the questions in our heads became more insistent:

What kind of art was entailed in the Citizen Power Peterborough work? . . . which residents would relate to it? . . . and what assumptions were being made about existing creative outlets in Peterborough? How much were Peterborough residents as a whole already 'active citizens'? How much were ethnic minorities and international migrant workers part of this? (see Rogers, 2012: 70–71) Would it enable or challenge austerity policies and the workings of food sector capitalism? Did these interventions work from an appreciation of the history of the city and its grounded sociality – its micro-sociality? Through residential fieldwork *Places for All?* tuned into the city in a different way from Citizen Power Peterborough, raising its own questions about alternative means of challenging injustice and inequality in the city.

Places for All? Micro-sociality and the politics of transformation

In Autumn 2010 as I reflected on whether to respond to the advertisement for the Connected Communities / Citizen Power Peterborough Fellowship, I began to visit the city on day trips from Brighton, building on earlier work in adjacent areas, and contacts made in research with migrant workers in the food industry (Rogaly, 2008). It was clear from the advertisement that this was to be more than a conventional research project aiming to contribute to knowledge and understanding. The call document required an ambition to go beyond the notion of, and investigation leading to, 'findings' and outputs, to one that could be transformational, making change. Rather than aiming merely to *find out* about citizenship, work and belonging (the key words, along with 'place' used in the project title), and, using a phrase already present in the very extensive call document, the project's stated aim became 'to build diverse and cohesive communities'.

Taken literally this could be seen as ethically and politically uncertain ground. It could be seen as pretentious and patronizing, suggesting both that such communities did not exist in Peterborough and that the *Places for All?* project was in a position to 'build' them where others implicitly were not. Moreover, rather than emerging from a collective decentralized consultative process in the city, the wording was put together by the bid team, none of us Peterborough residents, and was intended to speak to the language of the call document. There were obvious instrumental reasons for this and these raised further ethical questions (see Brownlie and Crowe, 2014).

The actions and good intentions of artists and scholars are given meaning within larger structural and institutional processes, which can define and limit the transformative potential of such projects . . . Our good intentions and careful reflexivity do not mean the voices of marginalized others will not be appropriated or commodified. (Mattingly, 2001: 456–457)

Though made uncomfortable by such issues, I persisted. I had worked in the area around Peterborough and had contacts working on provision of signposting and advice services for new international arrivals in the city, and met others through them as well as through accidental encounters. While writing the proposal for *Places for All?* I repeatedly asked the RSA to provide me with some of their contacts among Peterborough residents, including those involved in the Citizen Power Peterborough programme, but this drew a blank.¹⁴

Yet there was momentum in the project. This lay both in the skill, energy and enthusiasm of the team that were putting the bid document together with me, the generosity which often seemed to feature in how people received me, and my growing sense of connection with Peterborough. A casual conversation on a bus during one of those early visits led to me being guided all the way back to the rail station on the basis that my interlocutor had been helped in a similar way on their arrival from Latvia one year previously. The counter clerk at the football ground got into conversation with me about Brighton, speaking of how the South Downs reminded her of her grandparents' rural area of origin in Italy. Arriving to take up three days per week residence in March 2011 (more or less the day after funding was confirmed), I was shown two possible lodgings by an estate agent who personally drove me around Peterborough's 'parkway' flyovers talking at a rapid pace about how much he loved Brighton and how he often visited with his partner.

While these examples suggest the project was developing the beginnings of its own micro-sociality, I also became aware of an emerging alliance of organizations that had strategized together to face down the English Defence League rally the previous December, including churches, mosques and gurdwaras, the police and the city council (and that organized the post-EDL rally event referred to earlier which I attended). I learned that not all had been in favour of this approach as was evident in the small opposition rally organized by the Peterborough Trades Union Council. Both the cooperation and the conflict involved showed glimpses of micro-sociality, of community-in-the-making in the city. A shared agenda was emerging for the future of the right-to-the-city for all its residents crossing different institutional positions – differences were tactical. This made the *Places for All?* project's stated transformational aim feel somewhat presumptuous. Yet, at the same time, my sense of connection with this strand of existing and evolving micro-sociality in Peterborough made a project based on accompaniment seem both possible and worth striving for.

Moreover, while long-term residents had an established voice in the city, through local elections and through organizations based around faith or ethno-national identifications, this was not the case for the relatively large numbers of more recent international migrants, people who had arrived from the late 1990s onwards, including significant numbers of asylum-seekers and people directly seeking work and employment.¹⁵ The largest numbers of the latter were from countries of central and eastern Europe and, as a result, recent migrants tended to be referred to collectively as 'eastern Europeans'. Negative caricatures emerged of late night drinking, over-crowded housing and noise that

paid lots of attention to ethno-national stereotypes and none to the working conditions and shift patterns that were defined by the food sector capitalism under which most of the more recent arrivals laboured. My hope was that if *Places for All?* brought residents into dialogue through oral history and the arts, it might be possible for better relations to be built among current and former food factory workers.

As colleagues and I wrote the proposal, were interviewed and got into detailed discussions with the RSA in London about the shape of the project, I was excited about starting work in Peterborough, Kaveri Qureshi and I finding separate lodgings there as a part-time researchers, and using oral history in the spirit of its early practitioners who had also made connections between local and national struggles:

At Berkeley I brought labor organizers, farm workers, ex-prisoners, and Black Panthers to my classes to tell their histories ... In the 1970s, oral history and autobiographical histories resonated in diverse social movements that incorporated voices from below and fought for their inclusion in the national narrative. As a result 'no-name people' and 'history's etceteras' ... emerged as flesh-and-blood people with all the quirks of humanity and a counter-narrative to tell. (Platt, 2013)

Although *Places for All?* had a detailed monthly workplan (a requirement of the funders), its way of working evolved over time. This way of working – or conduct – contained its own contradictions. As we shall see in the vignettes from the car boot sale exhibition and the play in the next two sections of the paper, the project sought to accompany Peterborough residents in spaces where they felt comfortable, for example, to make and exhibit art in familiar spaces.¹⁶ The vignettes also show how at the same time, it invited transgression of existing social and spatial boundaries in the city.¹⁷ Thus, arguably, although an explicit claim to be a decolonizing project was made in the proposal that became the *Places for All?* fellowship, there was an outside agenda of change at work, one which sought to break down barriers of understanding between people with different histories of relationship to spatial mobility and immobility, and across the diversity of Peterborough's ethno-national and faith identifications. As a team we hoped furthermore that, if we were successful, people's attention would turn away from what divided them and towards those people and institutions actually responsible for austerity and for the downward trends in employment conditions for people who had jobs (O. Jones, 2014; Dorling, 2014).

Having an agenda was not unusual in projects that combined oral history with performance (Mattingly, 2001; Johnston and Pratt, 2010; Rogers, 2012; Richardson, 2015). It was noted, for example, that every one of the contributors to a recent conference on oral history and performance in Montreal had expressed political orientations to their work. One contributor argued that 'attempts at political neutrality on the part of a researcher can produce more distortions than expressions of solidarity might' (Dubois, 2014: 246). Such projects thus throw up a problematic of the micro-sociality approach, and with

the conduct of accompaniment: working with what already exists means engaging with existing structural and institutional inequalities, and making choices about *whom* to accompany and *which* micro-social relations, *which* emerging forms of community, to encourage, ignore, or even challenge.

Oral history could be transformative in personal ways too. Interviews contained their own micro-sociality, and varying degrees of rapport and trust or tension between narrators and interviewer. Sometimes connections were made through shared experiences uncovered during the interview. At other times, rapport was built across difference. Micro-sociality was enhanced by our practice of maintaining contact with narrators, often interviewing in more than one sitting, and going back to them to seek further consent both for the transcript to be quoted and for it to be deposited in Peterborough Local Studies and Archives.¹⁸ Most of the time Kaveri and I interviewed solo, and most of the narrators were interviewed singly. The interviews could be powerful experiences for all concerned. There is intimacy in an oral history interview that can lead to a sense of being heard, understood and accepted. This contains its own danger of 'overdisclosure' – hence our careful, ongoing, rolling consent process. Just as Wills (this issue) describes the 'labour of relationship making, brokering and sustenance' as being central to the Open Works project in Lambeth, the relations built with oral history narrators lay right at the heart of the *Places for All?* project and were carefully nurtured.

Nevertheless, throughout the project and to date I have been dissatisfied with our approach to working with a city. It seems wildly overambitious to try to tune in to, work with, transform, and encapsulate in writing a place that is made up of multiple worlds, and also that connects to other places across Britain and the rest of the world. However, it was simultaneously a process that I found I could not let go of on a number of levels: the intimacy of relations with people in Peterborough that continued and deepened, running as a counter to a busy work/family shaped life in Brighton; the sense of connection with people and organizations working to build links across the city, reduce racism and prejudice, and tackle inequality; anger at the disconnect that seemed to exist between institutional approaches to localism and 'big society' and what people were actually already doing but which was not being taken into account. It seemed that, over time, the contradictory temporalities and absurdities of being a part-time resident researcher became less important than the sense of acceptance, being allowed to accompany people and organizations already engaged in what Edensor *et al.* (2010) call 'vernacular creativity', and in struggles for equality at a time of austerity in Peterborough. As previously stated, this article does not argue against the further development of Peterborough's nascent higher education institution, nor against investment in a major arts venue. But it does make the case for a different method of working with people and arts that tunes in in a more inclusive and iterative way, a form of accompaniment that is based in co-production, and in the oral history ethos of shared authority. In the next section I explore two vignettes elaborating on the micro-sociality of the project. They show how relations built up through the project's oral history

work were interwoven with the curation of a photographic exhibition and with producing a play. As we shall see, each of these two elements of *Places for All?* had a specific plan, and, as it happened, trajectories that departed to a greater or lesser degree from those plans.

Micro-sociality: curating an outdoor exhibition at the Sunday car boot sale

It was a rain-sodden failure in spite of months of planning. The idea had been great and very much in keeping with the ethos of accompaniment in the *Places for All?* arts work. The photographs by Liz Hingley had built on evolving and deepening relations between the oral history narrators, Kaveri and myself.¹⁹ With either Kaveri or I present, Liz had worked over several hours with each of the 20 narrators who had accepted our invitation to take part in the photography work. She had taken a large number of shots and shared a selection with us and with each person afterwards. The choice of which photograph would be exhibited and appear on the website was collaborative, as was the choice of quote from the oral history interview that would accompany the photograph. Narrators had the final say over which of their words appeared alongside their portrait. Raminder Kaur had also contributed to these conversations as she had become familiar with the interview transcripts through her work on the play script, and was co-designing the early version of the project website.

Now, for the exhibition, Liz had carefully written out the quotes by hand and framed them with the printed photographs. The chosen venue was a multi-ethnic space, somewhere many people in Peterborough headed as a matter of course on a Sunday morning, a place for a bargain in a time of austerity (see Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013). Unlike, say, the city museum, the car boot sale, held each week in the car park at the stadium of Peterborough United football club (known locally as the POSH), seemed to guarantee an audience without any need for publicity. I had built a good relation with the organizer, and had visited his house with my son the previous day.

Yet when 29 April 2012 arrived it came with torrential downpours. Exceptionally and at the last minute the organizer called the car boot sale off.

With Liz feeling ill and languishing in the back seat of my car, my teenage son, who had come with me this particular weekend, Kaveri and I set up anyway in a disused room in the stadium building and were joined by seven hardy residents curious about what we were doing, impressed it was going ahead but, as with the three Peterborough-based photographers who also showed up (Zain Awan, Peter Budakiewicz and Chris Porsz), demonstrating a kind of solidarity with us, helping us deal with difficult circumstances, *accompanying us*. It was freezing and another research participant, a retired teacher who lived around the corner from the stadium, brought a flask of hot tea. The Peterborough-based photographers captured the occasion (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 *Zain Awan by Peter Budakiewicz*



Figure 2 *Relief and disbelief (Anna Siekacz, Agnieszka Coutinho and the author) by Chris Porsz*

This response – who would have wanted to venture out in such a torrential downpour? – was both generous and curious (Phillips, 2014). My interpretation is that the people involved felt for us and were, in a way caring for us. These were entirely non-economic actions. The disused room we had set up in became a ‘space of possibility’ (Bromberg, 2010). Indeed the whole encounter might never have happened if the Peterborough artists concerned had felt aggrieved

that they had not been invited to be part of the project at the outset. Part of the point was that the arts establishment in the city and the national bodies it was liaising with had missed out on two of these three local photographers. The third, Chris Porsz, born in Peterborough in the early 1950s, the son of a Polish holocaust survivor, was well known for his New England exhibition that was by coincidence still open at the city museum (see Porsz, 2012) as well as for his regular column in the *Peterborough Telegraph*.

This car boot exhibition fitted with Walkerdine and Studdert's definition of micro-sociality, as it involved both smiles shared between people who saw each other frequently but did not know each other, and a common cause. The event was fleeting, even ephemeral, yet made a lasting impression on all present, and was, in an incremental way, transformational (see Painter, 2012 on neighbour relations). In this case *we* were the cause of the Peterborough photographers, they were supporting us, as were the other residents who attended, including the woman who brought the flask of tea. All those who showed up (including the council's then Cohesion Manager Jawaid Khan) provided moral support and through their presence and active engagement signalled their interest in, respect for, and willingness to accompany both the conduct and content of what we were doing. People also recognized our need, knowing how long we had planned the car boot sale exhibition for. But there was no car boot sale, just a rudimentary exhibition hung by two academic researchers, the photographer was sick, and we showed vulnerability and dependence on others (de Carteret, 2008). Human fragility, and recognition of plurality had generated meanings-in-common in a disused room in the pouring rain one Sunday in late April at the POSH football stadium. Yet, when community is a verb, it is something that is done, that begins and ends. It passes.

Micro-sociality: producing oral history-based performances

Hanging an exhibition of photography may seem absurd for an academic social scientist. Yet, it had to be done. So, it turned out at about the same time, did the production of our play. The play, *Fair's (Not) Fair!* had been written by Raminder from her reading of the oral history transcripts. The play's director Mukul Ahmed had led a workshop in September 2011 involving young people who were interested in potentially being involved. Micro-sociality and generosity were evident at this event, which was hosted by the Peterborough Racial Equality Council (PREC), with which Kaveri and I had developed a good working relation. In this case our common goal was the emphasis on race equality, and appreciation of plurality in the multiple ethnicities and national origins in the city. PREC was working to improve community relations in the city, recognizing the common context of austerity, and the diversity of individual experiences.

The play was to be performed by young Peterborough residents; we recruited a local production management team (Keely Mills and Jabeen Shafee) in winter 2012 and held auditions in the early spring so that script

development workshops could begin in late May. We had negotiated with the city council's outsourced arts company Vivacity to be part of the Peterborough Arts Festival in July. I didn't know I was producer when I started doing the work – it grew out of necessity. I tried to use contacts I had made through having been present in the city for nine months to put feelers out to sixth-form drama teachers that we would be holding auditions. We were keen to engage people from a diverse range of backgrounds. Too often in Peterborough the young cast would be drawn from the youth programme at the Key Theatre or from Kings School, both of which were largely white British and middle class. We wanted to broaden things not only socially but also geographically. With the enthusiastic cooperation of the head of drama at Bushfield Academy, based in the Ortons, a mainly white British outer suburb of the city, Mukul, Zain Awan and Jabeen held a round of auditions with over 20 drama students.

All along the way role reversals and spatial transgressions were taking place. The white British students who were recruited came for a script development workshop in the central, ethnically diverse, Gladstone area of the city, a new and transformative experience for them. After the theatre production finished in July 2012 two members of the cast were involved in delivering theatre workshops in Gladstone through an organization – Step Up – that worked mainly with Pakistani heritage young people. At the same time the group of young people involved in the initial theatre workshop had become more ethnically diverse due to further attempts to recruit actors from city-centre schools. However, the road to casting was bumpy in that it was hard to guarantee people would turn up for rehearsals, even though we paid expenses to the actors. The ethnic and national diversity of the cast diminished (for comparable experiences see Mattingly, 2001; Walkerdine, this issue).

We held the script development workshops at the recently recommissioned mosque at 60 Cromwell Road where we had been allowed to work by Abdullah Majid, who had an office in the building as coordinator for the umbrella organization Islam Peterborough. The mosque at 60 Cromwell Road had been the first mosque to open in the 1960s when large numbers of men from Pakistan arrived to work in the city and live in the area. The script development workshops and the rehearsals – this time with space provided at the Millfield Medical Centre, which had thousands of recently arrived international migrants on its books – involved further spaces of possibility, possibilities for encounter across boundaries. These were places that people used in everyday life. They were used by people who were not, in the main, part of the city's mainstream arts scene. The same could be said for the football ground, where we were to hold one of our performances.

It was nevertheless a fraught time – micro-sociality and accompaniment unsurprisingly involved tension and conflict (see Mattingly, 2001). Would we have enough able actors in the cast, was the play too long, how would we market a play that was, inevitably given the short time that had passed since the

oral histories were recorded and our desire to involve the cast in developing the script, still being revised and worked on? At the last minute the director had to recruit two actors from London (Rez Kabir and Erene Kaptani) as too many young people dropped out after the workshops due to competing commitments, including the need to prepare for A-level examinations and pre-existing travel plans. Generosity was shown by many to make this work, including two Peterborough artists who provided art-work for the set (Chris Porsz and Jaroslaw Sokol).

As *de facto* producer I was tense. I had thought I would be getting on with my academic role at that time – analysing oral history transcripts – but found that my organizational and diplomatic skills were being drawn on to help keep the show on the road (see Rogers, 2014). It was in trying to hold the production together in spite of some conflictive relationships that I experienced the greatest discomposure. There were tensions between Peterborough-based people and those coming from outside for short periods to contribute to the work; there were also tensions over responsibility for different aspects of the creative work involved in the play, casting, publicity and marketing, music and stage management. This dampened the enthusiasm of some and created sleepless nights for others, me included.

With production managers Keely and Jabeen I pressed on with the work of securing and helping maintain relations with the five venues identified for performances: St Paul's Church; The Venue at the Peterborough United football ground; Gladstone Park Community Centre; the Green Backyard (community growing scheme); and the Peterborough Arts Festival in Central Park. The last performance in the park was cancelled because of torrential rain the day before. The individual relations with Abdullah Majid at the mosque, with the Revd Ron Watkinson at the church, Sophie and Renny Antonelli at the Green Backyard, and the institutional relations developed with the football club venue hire team were produced by and involved their own forms of micro-sociality.

For example, the woman in charge of venue hire at the POSH was part of the London diaspora (see Watt *et al.*, 2014), and a lifelong Arsenal fan, a point of connection for me. We had been advised by a leading local arts organization not to perform the play at the football ground: 'nobody will come'. Yet this too proved to be a space of possibility. Unaccustomed to being in what she and others perceived as a predominantly white English space, one hijabbed Pakistani heritage woman took a selfie sitting in a seat in the ground before the show and posted it on Facebook. The framed photographs of oral history narrators were exhibited as they were on other nights (Figure 3). A good size audience of over 40 people attended the performance.

Raminder's script drew on oral history transcripts from the project – and involved aspects of lived experience including food factory workplace scenes with shop floor banter and flirtation that many in the audience, especially people who had recorded their own stories as part of the project, enjoyed. One oral history narrator, who attended the show at the POSH, came back with his



Figure 3 *Before the show at the football ground: narrator Alicia Vandenthoren stands by the photograph taken of her by Liz Hingley*



Figure 4 *Audience greet cast members (Kristina Burns, Rebekah Lord and Rez Kabir) at the end of the Gladstone Park performance*

son to the Green Backyard performance, along with a bottle of whisky for the actors.

At the Gladstone Park Community Centre, used mainly by south Asian heritage people, the audience was 78. Some men left during the performance to go to prayers in the mosque. Here the micro-sociality bubbled over when oral history narrators met members of the cast in whose parts they had recognized their own stories (Figure 4). The memories expressed in the play and

the accompanying photographic exhibition created conversations, reunions, affective feelings of and for place and transgression of boundaries.

The spaces of possibility opened up by the *Fair's (Not) Fair!* production were notable for micro-sociality partly because nobody had tried this kind of whole city diversity approach before in Peterborough (though for examples in other cities, see Rogers, 2012). The Gladstone Park performance was attended by the same leading arts organization that took the opportunity after the show to gather contacts for future work – it had not previously worked with south Asian heritage audiences in the city. The media outlet that gave us the most coverage was the 10,000-circulation Polish weekly *Nasze Strony*, which like many minority creative outlets was little known in the mainly white British middle-class mainstream arts community. Boundaries continued to be crossed in terms of ethnicity, migration history and class.

Conclusion

During the recession of the early 2010s, jobs were available in Peterborough – low-paid contingent jobs. The city's long history of inward migration from within the UK and beyond had continued and Peterborough developed a national reputation as a major destination for central and eastern European migrants. Yet the central government's austerity budgets and the city's experiments with localism meant that services were cut for all residents. The *Places for All?* project took place in Peterborough at this time and in this context. Through oral history and theatre it explored inequality in the city, and the commonality of workplace experiences among ethno-national communities and between long-term residents and new migrants. It also revealed continuity and change over time. The project sought to work alongside and learn from existing initiatives in Peterborough. It engaged with people in spaces of possibility that sometimes enabled unplanned transgressions of socio-spatial boundaries by city residents, such as between predominantly white and multi-ethnic neighbourhoods of the city, and through involvement at the football stadium and a local mosque by people who were not accustomed to those spaces and their encounters with others who were. The micro-sociality that developed through the project emerged out of what oral history narrators brought to it. It was unsurprising too that doing community in this way caused tension and conflict as well as cooperation.

It was through the micro-sociality of the project itself that the various people and constituencies involved developed plans for action – rather than simply bulldozing through a plan set out in the fellowship proposal. Yet *Places for All?* was inevitably a site in which power operated unevenly. I was the Fellow, the Principal Investigator and the funders had paid the university to release a large chunk of my time. I was not bound up with other ways of earning my livelihood, and my teaching and administrative duties at the university had been significantly reduced (see Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013). This was a privileged and powerful position, and there were political choices to be made about whom

to accompany and what that accompaniment should consist of. But my role was by no means the locus of all the power in the project. Micro-sociality in some of its most productive forms emerged when I was most vulnerable and things looked like crashing.

How much does this reflect a sense of the being-in-common that emerges from Studdert's reading of Arendt? A recognition of common humanity, nurtured in this case through repeated interaction, and through the sharing of stories, always contains both plurality – not just between individuals but within the same person – and also human fragility. The concept of micro-sociality is not on its own sufficient to understand complex power relations nor the interplay between individual relations and wider structural forces. However, it is a useful and productive conceptual move away from the idea of community as a thing that is lacking or lost. And, as with accompaniment, it recognizes that communing involves both conflict and cooperation. There was conflict in the *Places for All?* project and this could lead to new ways of thinking, to transformation, to changes of plan and perspective. For example, following collective reflection on some of the tensions involved in the production of the theatre performances, plans were changed and Peterborough residents, led by Jabeen Shafee, were given control of the final tranche of money that had been meant for a second exhibition of Liz Hingley's photographs. The resulting tea party brought many of the people involved in the project together – from venue providers, to young actors, film-makers, and many oral history narrators.²⁰ At this event, in the heart of the city, the framed photographs were publicly exhibited one last time, and then presented to the individual participants that appeared in them.

As long as British universities continue to be institutions through which unequal class relations are reproduced (Rogaly and Taylor, 2015), the conduct of projects that seek to combine academic research with socially engaged arts practice will be fraught, and contain their own contradictions (Mattingly, 2001; Rogers, 2012). Yet, other scholar-practitioners have shown how solidarity with existing struggles for equality, including through valuing vernacular creativity, can be part of wider projects of transformation that challenge neoliberal ideas and practices. Following Johnston and Pratt (2010), High *et al.* (2014) and Richardson (2015), this article has pointed to the ever-shifting micro-socialities that are entailed in attempts to combine oral history and performance. It has also proposed the adoption in such work of an anti-colonial ethos of accompaniment that insists on a critical approach to the internal dynamics of academic-led attempts at co-production, and on the importance of transformation and struggle 'in here' as well as 'out there'.

At the time of writing my own institutional base at the University of Sussex continues to be transformed by neoliberalism, even while the latter is resisted in micro-social ways. In spite of a brave student-led campaign of occupation and resistance, the jobs of 235 caterers, housekeepers, security staff and craftspeople have been privatized. Over in Peterborough new houses have been constructed next to the football ground – who knows if the council will

now succeed in attracting the 'creative class'. The Green Backyard opposite the stadium is holding out with its vision for a community growing space in the city. And when the English Defence League returned to Peterborough in March 2014, the event was a damp squib, numbers were in the tens rather than hundreds.

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Notes

- 1 As might have been expected from earlier patterns of change across British neighbourhoods, localities, cities and regions (see Massey, 1995; Ramsden, 2014).
- 2 The full title of the project was 'Places for All? A Multi-media Investigation of Citizenship, Work and Belonging in a Fast-changing Provincial City'.
- 3 Mukul Ahmed, Teresa Cairns, Denis Doran, Liz Hingley, Raminder Kaur, Kaveri Qureshi and myself.
- 4 These are housed at the National Life Stories collection at the British Library. Other residents' stories were engaged through encounters and interactions during residential fieldwork and photography work.
- 5 <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/apr/03/research-funding-row-america-big-society>
- 6 <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jan/20/the-big-society-civil-exchange-audit-shows-coalition-contempt-and-hypocrisy>
- 7 The paradox disappears, however, when it is remembered that the encouragement of inward movement by a 'creative class' has become an increasingly common handmaiden to urban regeneration policies (Edensor *et al.*, 2010; Rogers, 2012: 68).
- 8 National Census 2011.
- 9 Area profiles, Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity, University of Manchester, <http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census>
- 10 <http://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk/news/politics/politics-news/peterborough-open-as-normal-for-edl-march-this-weekend-1-5962535>
- 11 In contrast, an anti-EDL protest rally on the same day (organized by the Peterborough Trades Union Council) was attended by an estimated 80 people, mostly Peterborough residents. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-england-cambridgeshire-11976496> (accessed 20 February 2015).

- 12 A response echoed in Cologne cathedral's response to a Pegida march in 2015: to turn off its lights.
- 13 Dr Mark Roberts of De Montfort University.
- 14 Later, after *Places for All?* had been funded, this changed, and some of the local introductions I received from RSA colleagues made an important difference to the project.
- 15 Although many recent migrants attended places of religious worship and were indirectly represented through clergy.
- 16 As with the Ocean estate case study in Wills (this issue).
- 17 As with the town centre performance described by Walkerdine (this issue).
- 18 Anonymity was preferred by most of the 54 narrators who consented to their transcripts being deposited but the option not to have the interview transcript anonymized was also available and several people chose it. See debates on the ethics of anonymization in Ni Laoire (2007) and Richardson (2015).
- 19 They can be viewed on line at <http://www.placesforall.co.uk/photos/>
- 20 A film of the event made by Zain Awan is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I-21FRcqHY>

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